

P240
Am 32
No. 22

No. 22.

I DON'T BELIEVE IN RELIGION.

"I DON'T BELIEVE IN RELIGION." So a great many people say, and a greater number think. When one of this class is urged to love Christ, to pray to God, to read the Bible, to keep the Sabbath holy, to worship God in his family, and bring them to Church, or any other plainly commanded duty which he dislikes, he will coolly reply, "I am not a member of the Church; I don't believe in religion." As if he supposed that the authority of God's law depended on his pleasure, or the truth of religion upon his belief of it.

Some of these unbelievers will lament their unbelief as a misfortune which somehow or other has befallen them. They would like to enjoy that high religious feeling which Christians possess, but really they are unable to believe the dogmas of religion. And as their opinions are the inevitable result of their education and circumstances, if they should happen to be wrong, they can not help it, but must just rely upon the infinite mercy of God to preserve them from the consequences of error, and do not see why they may not please God as well as the rest of the world, most of whom do not give themselves very much trouble about religion.

But this convenient creed is short at both ends. For the teaching of the Bible is that the rest of the world does not please God at all, but is crowding down the broad road to destruction; and the particular business of the Holy Spirit is to convince the world of this sin of unbelief. And if unbelief of the truth be a misfortune, and the mercy of God has not prevented it from falling upon them, it may happen that it will not prevent a further misfortune of the belief of a lie from falling upon them, for misfortunes never come single. If a blind man shall undertake to walk a crooked road, sincerely believing it to be straight, neither God's mercy nor his sincerity shall prevent him from falling into the ditch. So if a wordly-minded man shall persist in the belief that ungodliness is just as pleasing to God as piety, and contemptuously despise mercy and salvation through Christ, and sincerely believe that he is better off in the devil's service than in God's worship,

2 I DON'T BELIEVE IN RELIGION.

I see no good reason why God's mercy, which allowed all these unfortunate delusions to come upon him, may not as well allow them to remain upon him—and as he has had the misfortune to live in his sins because of his unbelief, why he may not have the misfortune to die in his sins, because of his unbelief—and, as God's mercy did not prevent him from despising the service of God in this world, why it may not well enough consist with allowing him to remain of the same opinion in the next world; aye, and to continue of the same opinion throughout eternity—and as his opinion led him to serve the devil on earth, notwithstanding God's mercy, why the same opinion may not lead him to continue in the devil's service in hell, notwithstanding God's mercy; for surely God's mercy is not bound to drag people to heaven, whether they will or no. If unbelief, then, be a misfortune merely, it is certainly a great one, the cause and beginning of many others, a fire that will surely burn the house it has caught on, a sickness that will be the death of the sufferer. The man who will not believe God's truth, must of necessity believe the devil's lie—for there is no third theory—and so live in error, and die in error, and find himself as far astray from truth and happiness in the next world as he was when he left this. And so unbelief and perdition are as firmly chained together by common sense, as they are by Holy Scripture, which says, "*He that believeth not shall be damned.*"

But still you may urge that, "It is very hard that God should damn a man for his opinions, seeing he cannot help them—that belief or unbelief is wholly involuntary. We believe where we have sufficient evidence; and where we do not see sufficient evidence, we can not believe if we would. If I see any thing with my own eyes, I cannot help believing it. If I have had experience of any feeling, I can not help believing its reality. If any scientific problem is mathematically proved to me, I can not help believing it. But religion gives no such proof to me; therefore I can not believe it. Its doctrines are beyond my comprehension. The miracles recorded in Scripture are contrary to all my experience, and the duties it requires are utterly beyond my power to perform. How can I believe such a mass of mysteries, or live up to such a standard of piety?"

The truth or falsehood of the Gospel does not depend on your likes or dislikes, nor the authority of God's law on your notions of

your ability to keep it. God nowhere commands you to understand the mysteries of religion any more than the mysteries of nature. You never allege that you can not believe that the sunshine is warm and bright because you can not explain how it is so. Nor is the evidence on which you are called to believe the truths of religion the evidences of your senses; for you believe in God I hope, yet you never saw him: nor yet the evidence of your own experience; for you believe you will die, though neither you nor any one living ever experienced death. You have no more need for mathematical demonstration of the authenticity of the Bible, before you believe it and frame your life by it, than of the authenticity of the Constitution of the United States, or of the laws of Ohio, of which, nevertheless, you have not the slightest doubt, and frame your life accordingly.

And now, as to your not being able to help your unbelief, we will inquire a little into that. A person believes according to the evidence he sees of the truth of any statement, or according to the confidence he has in the integrity of the person who makes it. His view of the evidence depends upon the attention he gives to it. There may be sufficient evidence for the truth of religion, but the man who does not attend to it will not see it. The astronomer knows very well that the earth moves round the sun, because he has studied the evidence of that truth; while the savage who has not, or the school-boy who will not, obstinately asserts that the sun moves round the earth. This they very sincerely believe, because of their ignorance; and while they are ignorant they can not help believing as they do; but surely no one will say that they can not help their erroneous belief, unless he can show that they can not help their ignorance. The things revealed in the Bible are not self-evident truths—had they been so we had needed no Bible: he who would believe them must attend to the evidences of their truth which God has furnished. If any one, either from dislike of these truths themselves, or of the duties to which they lead, will refuse or neglect to consider these evidences, it is very certain that he will not believe them, and still more certain that he should not affirm that he can not help his unbelief. So when you say you can not believe the Bible in general, or some of its particular truths, that may be very true, because you keep yourself in ignorance of the evidence; but while you keep yourself ignorant, it is

false to say you can not help your unbelief. You can certainly read the Bible through, from beginning to end. That is the very least examination that any book, worth reading at all, can receive. You know that it would be only a lie to your own conscience to say, "I can not help my unbelief of this book, which I have never read." Now I put it to your own conscience, Have you read the Bible through, yea or not? If not, your unbelief is wilful. You can help it, but you will not.

When I speak of reading the Bible, I do not mean such a cursory and forced perusal as a lazy school-boy gives his arithmetic, reading the words and figures because he is told to do so, but never giving any serious study to learn their meaning, nor applying to his teacher for aid in his difficulties; but, after yawning over a page or two, throwing down the book with disgust, and saying he can not believe such nonsense. Just so some persons read the Bible, either because they are told to do so by their parents, or because their consciences say they should; but they fill their hearts and minds with other matters, and when their sleepy attention is by chance roused enough to see a difficulty, they never grapple with it; and, though God has promised his Holy Spirit as a teacher to those who ask him, they never thought it worth while to try whether he was in earnest or not. Now, let the conscience of every such person answer, Is it your fault or God's that you are thus impious? Until, then, you repent of your impiety, and earnestly pray for the Holy Spirit to teach you the truth, and pray in vain, it is utterly false for you to say that you can not help your unbelief. Your religion or irreligion is just as much a matter of your own choice as the trade you practice or neglect, at your pleasure.

But still it is urged; "Granting that we do choose our belief, what great harm can there be in doubting certain mysterious dogmas, or denying certain religious doctrines? There must certainly be room for harmless differences about religion, as well as about other things. My belief or unbelief can do no injury to God, who is far removed beyond the reach of my opinions. And if my opinions do no injury to my neighbors, I see no reason why I should perish eternally on account of them, even though they should prove to be erroneous, and I might have known better."

If,—aye, that is just the point, that *if*. Let us inquire whether unbelief of God's word, and contempt for God's law, be injurious

treatment of Him or not; and whether a life of ungodliness and irreligion be a harmless example to set before your neighbors; and whether God could, with safety to the universe, allow such people as you to think and do as they please with impunity.

The character of the person whom you refuse to believe has certainly something to do with this matter, though you seem not to have thought of that at all. There are thousands of persons in this world who have no special claim upon your attention, and yet the honor due to all men as fellow-beings demands that when one of them addresses you, you listen to his communication. It is not until a person has earned the character of a public liar and cheat that you refuse him a hearing, and turn him out of doors. By your wilful unbelief and neglect of religion you treat God with more contempt than you would show to any passing stranger, and turn Him out to receive the like disrespect from others. If an intimate friend addressed a letter to you, and you returned it unanswered, unperused, unopened, every person who knew that, would at once conclude that this friend had deceived and injured you, and that you took this method of closing your intercourse with him, to prevent him from deceiving and injuring you again. God has been a good friend to you; yet you will neither read his letter nor believe his communication. Is that kindly to your friend? When the Secretary of Congress sends authenticated copies of the laws of the United States to the governors and people of the various States, if some of them should refuse to read them, and say they did not mean to pay any attention to them, because they did not believe in such things, would you think that this was simply a queer opinion of these people, but one that had no great harm in it? Would you think them good loyal American citizens, albeit they would neither acknowledge the Constitution, obey the laws, or submit to the judges? Would you not say that their rejection of the documents argued their disloyalty to the Government that sent them, that their disobedience proved their treason, and that their rebellion called for all the forces of the nation to suppress and punish it? God is your Governor. He has sent you a communication, but you will not receive it. It contains his laws, but you will not read them. You live in the daily violation of them, and say to your fellow-man you hope it is no harm, that your opinions on religion differ from God's, and surely there can be no

great harm in one's opinions. When you answer to God for your sins, will you dare to say that you transgressed his law because you did not believe it—that indeed you never read it—that you did not think such a matter worthy of the least attention—that you did not believe in religion?

The Lord Jesus Christ is certainly worthy of better treatment than you give him. If you could prove him to be a liar and an impostor, if you could show that his teachings were impure and unholy, and that the record of his mighty works was all a fable, then your unbelief would be blameless. There is no middle ground for you to take. Jesus is either what he said he was—the Son of God, the Savior of sinners; and his Gospel is what he declares it is—God's message for your soul's salvation; or he is not what he professed to be, and so is a liar and an impostor, and as such to be despised by all honest men. This is what every unbeliever says by his conduct, namely, that Jesus is not worthy of belief. Now let me press this upon the conscience of every half-way unbeliever who may read this tract: Are you prepared to prove Jesus Christ to be an impostor and a cheat? Will you go to the judgment seat of God with the evidence in your hands that he is a liar, and his Gospel an imposture? It makes no difference what the form of your unbelief may be, whether you are a scoffing libertine or a decent church-goer—whether you have sense enough to see the consequence of unbelief, and honesty enough to avow it—or whether you try to cloak the unbelief of your heart by an oily-tongued civility—the language of every person who does not profess a hearty faith in Christ, and become a member of his Church, is most plainly and unmistakeably this:

“I do not believe Jesus Christ to be the Son of God.”

“I do not believe that God sent him into the world.”

“I do not believe that he taught the truth.”

“I do not believe that he wrought miracles.”

“I do not believe that he died to save sinners.”

“I do not believe in forgiveness through his blood.”

“I do not believe that he rose from the dead.”

“I do not believe that he ascended up into heaven.”

“I do not believe that he governs the world.”

“I do not believe that he will come again to judge me and all the world at the last day.”

"But I believe that—

"The Bible is a fable."

"That such a person as the Jesus it describes never lived."

"That the Apostles were vile lying impostors," and,

"That all Christians are either knaves or fools."

Can you imagine that it is an affair of no consequence that you thus vilify Christ and his Gospel, and put him to open shame?

The Holy Spirit bears witness to the truth of God's message, and of Christ's mission. He has attested the truth of the gospel by many most wonderful works; among others by teaching the first preachers to proclaim it in languages they never learned from man, else it had never come to your ears. Multitudes of those who saw these miracles were convinced so fully of the divinity of the gospel, that they suffered death rather than disown it. The Holy Spirit has given you stronger evidence of the truth of the facts of the gospel history, of the life and death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, than you ever had of any other history whatever. You have no such abundance of conclusive proof that such a man as George Washington lived and fought his country's battles, or that the Continental Congress declared the Independence of these United States, as you have that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and that his Apostles preached the gospel and planted churches to preserve and proclaim it over the world. You have only one national holiday in the year to commemorate the Declaration of Independence, while every week has a "Lord's Day," to celebrate the resurrection of your Lord, and every church bell rings out in your hearing, "Christ is risen, Christ is risen." If you suppose it an easy matter to get people persuaded to give up their usual employments, and celebrate commemorations of things which never happened, you can try the experiment. Suppose you persuade the people of Kentucky, black and white, bond and free, to observe the 4th of August every year as a holy day, and to go to church and give thanks to God for the dissolution of the Union, or for some other event which never happened, and which, if they can help it, never will. You would, doubtless, be sent to the nearest lunatic asylum before you had proceeded far on such an errand. Now, do you think Christ and his Apostles were such madmen, or that the hundreds of thousands who believed them were fools? Or, that at some later period, the world was peopled with a race of idiots, and

suddenly, in Italy and England, in Syria and Switzerland, in France and Persia, in Germany and Africa, a number of knowing men invented the gospel story, and got them to believe it, and persuaded them to employ a day in every week in hearing and commemorating events in which they were no ways interested, and which, in fact, never happened? How do you account for the observance of the Lord's Day, and of the Lord's Supper, and the existence of the Church of Christ? By your saying, "I don't believe in religion," you would make out these things to be all delusions of Satan. Are the struggles of your own conscience from the same source? Is it a light thing to strive with the Spirit of God, and quench the light within you, and feed your own soul with a miserable lie, which for very shame you dare not put into words, and tell to your neighbors?

Do you really believe that it is in no way offensive to God, that you treat his message with such contempt as you would not show to the meanest of your neighbors—that you receive his Son as a lying impostor—that you treat the writings inspired by the Holy Ghost as forgeries, and His ordinances as fooleries, and drown His voice in your own soul as a delusion? Is it a small sin to despise the Father, to reject the Son, and do despite to the Spirit of Grace? Or do you suppose He is only jesting who says, "*Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.*"

And now let us inquire whether your unbelief be not as injurious to your neighbors as it is offensive to God, and hurtful to your own soul. Your opinions, it is true, will hurt nobody so long as you keep them to yourself. But you do not. Every action of your ungodly life proclaims them. Your neighbors all know that you do not serve God, that you do not love Christ, that you do not belong to his Church, and you tell them, "I don't believe in religion." So, by precept and example, you do your best to make them all of the same opinions, and teach them to imitate your practices. If irreligion and ungodliness be good for you, it is equally good for them. It is not your fault that all the world is not of your way of thinking and acting, for, if they would be guided by you, they would every one say as you say, "I don't believe in religion." God judges you according to your heart and intention, and according to the tendency of your conduct, though he does not let you do all the evil you would; just as you judge

the villain to be an incendiary, and worthy of the penitentiary, who sets fire to your house, though you see it, and put it out before it is burned down.

Let us see now what would be the consequences of your unbelief to your neighbors, if God did not prevent them. Your forefathers were naked savages, with a piece of raw hide thrown over their shoulders, who lived in wattled huts, and ate roasted acorns, and burned their own children in sacrifice to devils. If you have a coat to your back to-day, or a loaf of bread in your cupboard, if you have a market to go to, or a road to reach it; if you have a school for your children, or children to send to it, you owe all these blessings to that religion which you say you don't believe. Yet you would do what you could to stop its progress, and allow the savage and the heathen to live on in misery, and butcher each other, as they ever have done, and say, "O, my opinions do no harm to my neighbors." Are you not worse than a savage?

You are an American—a friend of liberty. For six thousand years tyrants have trampled upon the liberties of mankind. Pharaohs and Nebuchadnezzars, Emperors of Rome and Emperors of Russia, the Sea Kings of Europe and the Khans of Tartary, Kings of France and Emperors of Germany, one race of tyrants after another, with bloody sword or legal chain, has hewn down the rights of men, and manacled their God-given liberties in every land where the religion of Christ has not reigned. The world's history does not show a single exception. The only notion of true liberty you have, you learned from the Bible. The manliness to speak for it, and fight for it, and die for it, which bequeathed your birth-right of liberty, your Puritan fathers gathered from religion. Religion, Christ's religion, which makes men free indeed, is the only safeguard of liberty. There is no liberty at this moment save in those lands where the religion of Christ prevails. Look over the map of the world. Have the people of China liberty? Are the people of Russia free? Have the butchering, kidnapping tribes of Africa freedom. Is Mohammedan despotism liberty? Is South American anarchy liberty? Would you submit to the police of France, or take a lodging in the dungeons of Italy? Would you exchange the Constitution for the Austrian concordat, or the ballot-box for three revolutions in the year? England and America, the lands of liberty, are the lands of religion; but you "don't believe

in religion." A whole nation once did not. They voted that there was no God, that death was an eternal sleep, that reason was the only ruler, that the Sabbath and the worship of God should cease. Then, having removed the law of God, the only foundation on which the law of man can rest, they commenced butchering each other, until the streets of Paris ran ankle deep with blood, and the remnant rushed into the arms of absolute military despotism as a refuge from atheistic anarchy. And this, unbeliever, is what you would bring your country to, if you could. Let every one adopt your opinions, and we would have all the horrors of the French Revolution, and of Napoleon's decrees, and conscriptions and proscriptions, before seven years. How dare you say your unbelief does no harm to your neighbor, when it undermines the citadel of your country's liberties?

Your neighbors have consciences and souls. They know they have offended God. The guilt of unforgiven sin is a grievous load upon the heart of a sorrow-stricken, dying man. He knows, he feels in every fibre of his soul, that losses and disappointments, that sorrows and pains, that agony of mind and sickness of body, which ever follow the transgression of God's laws, are marks of God's displeasure. His common sense tells him that these things befall sinners too uniformly to happen by chance, and that the God who sends them has some reason for thus visiting sin. He knows, he feels, that if God continues to deal with sinners after death as he has done before it, the sinner will have sorrow. Then this death which approaches! Almighty God smiting every sinner with the sword of death, making earth one vast grave-yard, and the human race, shrieking and flying from the fearful foe, compelled to become its tenants! What does it mean? And conscience says, and Scripture says, and he knows it to be true, "*The wages of sin is death.*" O to be freed from this sin! O to be delivered from this punishment of a sore wounded conscience, of the pangs of guilt, of the present dread, and dreadful prospect of deserved torment! He has no power to repair the past, little ability to amend the brief future. What shall he do to be saved? In this extremity the gospel comes to his ears, the only religion on earth which even professes to offer free forgiveness of sins. He hears repentance and remission of sins proclaimed in Jesus' name. He is told, "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and*

thy house." He inclines to believe the joyful sound, to accept pardon and peace in Jesus. But you stand at his side, and with a contemptuous smile you inform him, "I don't believe in religion."

Inhuman wretch! Were you able to prove religion false, surely in such a world of sorrow, and with such a certainty of a coming world of woe as its falsehood would render inevitable, it were horrid cruelty to snatch from the parched lips of the dying sinner the only draught of peace which earth affords. But how awful your conduct, seeing that you can not prove it false, nay, that in your own soul you more than suspect it true! You dash in pieces the chalice which contains the blood of Christ—you laugh to scorn the voice of mercy to a dying world—you chase peace from earth and hope of heaven from men.

Unbeliever! This is the hellish malignity of your sin. You turn your face to the way of ruin—you murder the only religion that can deliver men from sin and hell—you close the gates of heaven, put the torch to God's building of mercy, open the bottomless pit of woe, and plunge every sinner of earth into everlasting perdition! How long, think you, will God tolerate such an enemy of God and man?

Fly, fly to Christ for pardon of your awful guilt. Bless God that there is forgiveness even for such as you. And say to every one of your acquaintances to whom you have declared your unbelief, *"It is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."*

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world, through Him, might be saved. He that believeth on Him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest that they are wrought in God."

"He that cometh from heaven is above all, and what he hath seen

and heard that he testifieth, and no man receiveth his testimony. He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true. For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God, for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him. The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand. He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.”—JOHN, chap. 3.



NOTICE.

April, 1857.

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